



GROWING SUPER SALADS

A good home-grown salad is as super a food as there is: far fresher than those iceberg lettuces grown in Spain or those thick-skinned tomatoes grown around Southport and in Holland, and therefore still packed with vitamins. But, an important BUT, a super salad is not just a few limp lettuce leaves, a radish, and a slice of tomato and cucumber. In fact, you cannot buy some of the ingredients for a super salad in the supermarket. You must grow your own.

1. **WHERE?** I grow little salad in my vegetable plot. Containers are best and these include seed trays and any big plastic boxes with drainage holes that are around a foot deep. I have lots of fish boxes; you could buy troughs and boxes from the garden centre or scrounge from farm shops, or make your own out of bits of wood. Use growbag compost or similar.
2. **TOMATOES:** Go for F1s or heritage varieties: Shirley, Ferline and Berry-Garden are F1s, Ailsa Craig, Black Russian and Brandywine great heritage.
 - a) Grow in 20 litre pots rather than shallow growbags: less watering problems.
 - b) In these varieties remove all side shoots and tie them to a vertical support (cane).
 - c) Feed with liquid tomato fertiliser when first flowers fade on alternate days.
 - d) For a later crop, let one of the side shoots grow in July and, when it has 3 leaves, remove and plant in a pot as a cutting and later put in a 10 litre pot. I have had tomatoes from such a cutting in December.
 - e) Shirley is the best all round variety but it has long trusses that can sometimes break at the base. Either snip off the tip third or tie the tip of the truss up to your cane support.
3. **CUCUMBERS:** Why grow big cucumbers when you could grow small ones that are eaten in one meal? Bangkok (length to 6"), Emilie (8") and La Diva (5") highly recommended. Grow one in a 20 litre pot and train up a cane support and feed as tomatoes.
4. **LETTUCES:** These are the basis of any salad but, from February to October, grow more than one variety to give a mix of shades and colour, texture and flavour. And forget the seed packet tip of sowing a row of seeds and thinning out to a foot. You are not after a row of big supermarket lettuces. So:
 - a) Suggested varieties for spring, summer and autumn salads: Tom Thumb and Little Gem (two essentials), Mazur, Webb's Wonderful (pick small), Lollo Rossa (red).
For
 - b) winter/overwintering: Winter Density, Valdor, and Arctic King. Try some heritage
 - c) varieties in summer: Grosse Blonde Paresseuse, Umbriacona Frastagliata and Blonde de Paris are lovely ones from the continent (Thomas Etty, Puddlebridge, Somerset TA19 9RL: or at www.thomasetty.co.uk).
 - d) Sow a small pinch of each in small plant pots and label. Then, when just starting to get their first real leaves, prick-out 3" apart in your box filled with compost keeping each variety together and separate from the others. Keep the box in a place that gets lots of sunlight.
 - e) Start harvesting when the leaves are touching: you will get a mix of varieties. Eventually you will end up with a very few bigger lettuce. I sow the seeds for the next box when I start harvesting the previous one, so I never run out.



5. **SALAD LEAVES:** Seed merchants usually sell mixes of several varieties so that from one packet you get lots of textures, shades and flavour. Quick to harvest (28 days max.).
 - a) Sow these thinly in seed trays and harvest by cutting the larger leaves and letting smaller ones grow. You will then get several cuttings from one box.
 - b) Try Heritage & Heirloom seeds at www.pennardplants.com (01749 860039): Flirty Girty's Frilly Leaf (a great mix) and Oriental Blend (7 different leaves).

Try Brighter Blooms at www.brighterblooms.co.uk : Oriental salad Leaf Mix, Bright and Spicy Mix, Mesclun Mix, or try their Rocket and Mizuna Red Knight.

6. **WATER CRESS:** Dead easy! Buy a packet of water cress from the supermarket (beware: buy English from Hants or Wilts, not Yankee). Take some shoots and put in a jam jar of tap water. When rooted plant in a large plant pot or a deepish box, each shoot about 4" apart. Keep watered and harvest the young shoots when ready. You can have water cress ready the year round with this method.
7. **RADISHES AND SPRING ONIONS:** Why grow always in rows? Fill a plant pot with compost and scatter the seeds thinly over the top. Cover with compost and water. Best radish variety is still French Breakfast, but try Salad Apache, a red spring onion, instead of White Lisbon.
8. **PEA SHOOTS:** The sign of a posh restaurant is that pea shoots are used as a garnish! Dead easy and with a nice garden pea flavour. Get some garden pea seeds (any, even mangetout and sugar snap...what you have left from the ones sown in the garden) and put them between sheets of soggy kitchen paper until the radicals are appearing. Take a seed tray of compost and put the peas, not quite touching, over the surface. Cover with more compost and water. Snip off the tips above the lower leaf, when the shoots are about 3" tall. More shoots will grow from the lower buds.
9. **SWEET PEPPERS:** Grow in 10 litre pots in the greenhouse and feed as tomatoes. Variety Thor F1 is a long sweet pepper and ideal for salads, either sliced raw in rings or toasted under the grill.
10. **FINAL POINTS:** You can get two crops of lettuce from the one boxful of compost. Eventually all our seed trays, pots and boxes need new compost. Why not save the old and, next February, add some special Potato Fertiliser, or Growmore or Blood, Fish & Bone, and fill potato bags or big tubs with it and pop in some first early potatoes. Keep in a frost-free conservatory or greenhouse. Today, 11 April 2017 Sainsbury's were selling small bags of Jersey Royals for £4 as a special for Easter; we will be enjoying our first Arran Pilots! If you do grow salad crops in containers, remember that watering and feeding are vital. Get them right and you will have perfect crops.
11. **NOTE:** There is also a HOW-TO sheet on growing tomatoes and other greenhouse crops.